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VIETNAM: Trade alone will not improve religious freedom conditions

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

In this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>, Magda Hornemann, a specialist on religion in South East Asia, reports that despite several "goodwill gestures" by the Vietnamese government, repression of religious believers has not diminished. Five leading Buddhists have recently been confined to their pagodas, while a Protestant pastor in Ho Chi Minh city faces imminent trial. The author dismisses fears that pressure from abroad for improved human rights will lead to a return to "isolationism", arguing that the regime needs to reform the economy to survive. But foreign trade alone will not encourage greater religious freedom in Vietnam: the government will respond only to consistent pressure. Without such pressure from foreign governments and individuals, Hornemann maintains, the outside world will be abandoning Vietnamese people courageously trying to secure their right to religious freedom.

In early January 2004, the Vietnamese government made an important gesture with respect to religious freedom. Senator Sam Brownback, the Chairman of the United States Senate's East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, was allowed to visit the Roman Catholic priest Fr Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly at the prison in which he is held. In October 2001, Fr Ly was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment for calling on his government to respect the right to freedom of religion and to return all confiscated religious properties to their original owners. Senator Brownback was the first Westerner to see Fr Ly since he was imprisoned. Their meeting provided a glimmer of hope that the Vietnamese government might be moving in a positive direction on this case.

This latest "goodwill gesture" by the Vietnamese government was not the only one over the last year. In April 2003, after over 20 years of effective imprisonment in his pagoda, the 85-year-old Supreme Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, was permitted to seek medical attention in Hanoi. During his stay in the Vietnamese capital, he was visited by Premier Phan Van Khai, who admitted that officials had been wrong to detain the Supreme Patriarch and the Venerable Thich Quang Do, the Executive President of the UBCV. The Premier went on to ask the Supreme Patriarch for his forgiveness of the government's past mistakes. In the same month, the Vietnamese government permitted a European Parliament delegation and the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam to visit the Supreme Patriarch on separate occasions.

However, just a few months after the events of April 2003, the Vietnamese government reverted to its usual practices of harassment and repression. In September, Fr Ly's niece and two nephews were sentenced by the Ho Chi Minh City People's Court to five years in prison on charges of "abusing democratic rights against national interests". The siblings were punished for sending information about human rights conditions in Vietnam to a Vietnamese-American religious freedom organisation and a Vietnamese radio station in southern California.

In October, local officials prevented the UBCV Supreme Patriarch and the Venerable Thich Quang Do from going to Ho Chi Minh City for a meeting with other UBCV personnel to select the next generation of UBCV leaders. Three UBCV monks who did attend the meeting were later arrested and sentenced to two years' house arrest, accused of violating the national security law. Meanwhile, the Supreme Patriarch and the Venerable Thich Quang Do were again placed under "unofficial" house arrest in their respective pagodas.

Explaining the decision to detain the five UBCV monks, a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted by the Associated Press claiming that "a number of people including Mr Dang Phuc Tue, Venerable Thich Quang Do, Mr Le Dinh Nhan, Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, and some other elements had used the pretext of religious activities for realising their wrongful political motivation and personal ambitions, thus undermining the great national solidarity bloc and Buddhism. Law enforcement bodies have handled these individuals in accordance with stipulations of the law on the bases of collected evidences and behaviour of the persons concerned."

Since then, religious freedom conditions have not improved. Almost all the over 400 Montagnard Protestant congregations in the Central Highlands remain unable to function. Meanwhile, the government's crackdown on the Hmong Christians in the Northwestern Highlands continues unabated. According to Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/religion/news/bn2003/bn-2003-12-30.htm>), local police destroyed house churches in four Hmong

villages just two weeks before last Christmas.

Local police also continue to harass unregistered Protestant house churches and their leaders in Ho Chi Minh City. Pastor Bui Van Ba, a house church leader, was scheduled for trial on 13 January this year for "resisting an officer doing his duty" after police had entered his house to break up a worship service. During the ensuing melee, Pastor Ba and several others were beaten while his wife was manhandled and fainted. The trial, postponed after international attention to his case, is expected soon.

The Vietnamese government's ambivalence about economic reforms and opening to the world, and the concomitant domestic social and political costs for the regime, has often been used to explain the government's "Jekyll and Hyde" personality when it comes to its human rights policy. The argument tells us that on the one hand, the government recognises the need to engage in economic reform, which involves establishing relationships with Western countries. Along with such opening is the expectation that other governments will criticise the regime for its human rights practices. On the other hand, the regime is not prepared to loosen its political and social control. This leads to occasional "goodwill gestures" but without any substantive and systematic improvements.

Indeed, the regime wants to expand its control. While the Vietnamese premier acknowledged the government's "mistakes" to the UBCV Supreme Patriarch and allowed a senior U.S. senator to meet one of the country's most prominent religious dissidents, the Communist Party passed a resolution in January 2003 reaffirming the regime's intention to expand its control over religious organisations and activities. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (<http://www.uscirf.gov/reports/02May03/vietnam.php3>), the resolution stated that the government must "[i]ncrease the state management of religious affairs". It also called for the establishment of party cells inside government-sanctioned religious organisations, including the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam that was recognised by the government in 2001. One deputy premier reportedly boasted that this was the first time that the Communist Party's Central Committee had taken up this issue, which had usually been delegated to lower government offices, suggesting the government's resolve.

Underlying this desire for control is the fear that religious organisations could be used as vehicles for both domestic and foreign forces to challenge - and even overturn - the political supremacy of the Communist Party. This fear is not without a historical basis. Until the final Communist victory in 1975, religious organisations indeed served as important sources of political and social mobilisation and opposition, both nationally and locally. Some religious organisations, such as the Hoa Hao Buddhists and the Cao Dais, even maintained political and military control over parts of Vietnam. The animosity between the Hoa Haos and the Communist Party has a particularly long history. The Hoa Hao Buddhists claim that their founder was assassinated by Communist Party officials in the 1930s. Even as the regime denies this allegation, it also continues to express concern that religious groups like the Hoa Haos could revive their political heritage. However, as the current regime continues to consolidate its hold over the country, such fears have very little basis.

Some continue to argue that the regime's policy is based on ideological dogmatism. There is certainly some truth in this. One can never rule out the influence of ideologues within the "black box" of the Vietnamese decision-making process. However, it would be wrong to attribute the entire rationale for official policies to ideological factors. The more fundamental reason is that Vietnam - like all authoritarian regimes, communist or otherwise - is concerned about survival and has demonstrated a willingness to do all that is necessary to maintain its hold on power.

However, the Vietnamese regime is finding it ever harder to implement and justify its current human rights policy as it pursues economic reform and opening. As it negotiates bilateral trade agreements with other governments and as foreign investors march into Vietnam, the regime must also be prepared to answer some very uncomfortable questions about its political repression and human rights abuses. The irony is that the consequences of the political decision to engage in economic development and modernisation are coming back to haunt the regime in a way that it may not have anticipated.

Yet the costs of reversing the course of economic reform are even greater than the costs that accompanied its initiation. This is an especially stark reality for an authoritarian regime that has neither ideological appeal nor democratic credentials. The communist government can derive its political legitimacy only from its ability to build and sustain economic prosperity. The regime has gone down a path of no return.

The decision to undertake economic development has thus created another fear: that if the West, particularly the United States (now Vietnam's largest export market) and the European Union (Vietnam's second largest donor), refuses to do business with Vietnam because of its human rights record, economic development will stall and the regime could indeed face challenges from other political and social forces, including religious organisations. For this reason, at the same time that the government reacts vehemently against European and U.S. criticisms about its human rights practices, it also sends official and "religious" delegations to the United States to "explain" its religious freedom policy in a bid to dissuade U.S. congressional members from adopting legislative measures that could derail economic reform in Vietnam. The government also invites foreign officials to visit Vietnam to learn the "truth about the conditions of religious freedom" and yet imposes heavy restrictions on whom and where these foreign guests may visit out of concern that they will discover the truth. Indeed, as one recent visitor claims, the government seems more fearful of the foreigners than believers are of the government.

The Vietnamese regime has every reason to be fearful of foreign interests, not because foreign governments are interested in

facilitating a "peaceful evolution" of the political system in Vietnam. Vietnam's political leaders should be fearful because it needs foreign trade, investment and economic assistance for the reasons mentioned earlier. Yet, for some reason, the West seems more afraid that Vietnam will adopt "isolationism" if foreigners become too critical of the regime's human rights record, thus denying outsiders any access to Vietnam. What proponents of such an argument fail to recognise is that the regime has made a political decision that could not be reversed without consequences for its hold on power. The free world has therefore little need to fear that its criticisms will harm its access to Vietnam. Instead, the lack of any consistent voice on this issue simply provides the current Vietnamese regime with additional excuses for not undertaking any political and social reform as part of its modernisation programme.

This is why it has been so disappointing that the governments of the United States and Europe have displayed so little consistency in promoting human rights, including religious freedom, in Vietnam. In the United States, the State Department has refused to follow the mandate of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 by designating Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for that regime's "ongoing, systematic, and egregious" violations of religious freedom. This failure comes despite overwhelming evidence of deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Vietnam since the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement was ratified by the U.S. Congress in 2001 and despite the State Department's own conclusions, contained in its December 2003 International Religious Freedom Report (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24327.htm>), that the Vietnamese government's religious freedom practices remained unchanged and in some areas deteriorated since the previous year. Meanwhile, in Europe, notwithstanding the voices of a few individual European parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations, the silence on this issue has been palpable.

Many government officials, business representatives and economic development groups have argued that increased economic relations with the world will build the domestic structure in Vietnam that is necessary for the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, and ultimately the establishment of a democratic political system. There is little question that economic development is important in bringing prosperity to the people of an impoverished society like Vietnam, but on its own does not provide for the protection of civil liberties and political rights. The recent experiences of other authoritarian regimes have already discredited the modernisation theory – the belief that economic development will pave the way for liberal democracy.

What is needed to ensure the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, in Vietnam is consistent effort by governments and individuals, Vietnamese and foreigners alike. The people in Vietnam have already demonstrated their courage and willingness to secure their rights. The least we can do is to support them.

A printer-friendly map of Vietnam is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=vietna>

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